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ABSTRACT

Working on the assumption that members of organizations create their own organizational reality by interpreting the behaviors and activities they see, the stories and myths about the organization that they hear, and pressures to conform to the norms and practices of the organization that they feel, a study examined a total of 58 stories collected from 33 different high tech organizations. The stories were analyzed according to their scripts or skeletal structures. Standard analyses focused on hero/villain, the action line, and scene. Informants occupied positions throughout the organizations, such as secretaries, engineers, regional managers, and bookkeepers. Among the stories collected, 18 were versions of the "boss story." Whether positive or negative, the stories focused on the power structure and, by emphasizing its existence, served to legitimate it. Rule breaking and its consequences were themes in 13 stories in the sample, while 10 dealt with a variety of internal and external obstacles that confronted the protagonists--employees at all different levels in the organization. Three other story types appeared in the sample in smaller numbers: "Can the Little Person Rise to the Top?" "Will I Get Fired?" and "Will the Organization Help Me When I Have to Move?" Of the 10 remaining stories, 4 had to do with institutionalized narratives, 2 dealt with unexplainable phenomena, and the final story was industry-specific and hinted at its "anything goes" reputation. (HOD)

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STORYTELLING IN HIGH TECH ORGANIZATIONS:

A MEDIUM FOR SHARING CULTURE

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An important medium for the transmission of cultural information is the story or tale. Throughout history, attitudes, values, and traditions have been passed from generation to generation in the form of stories. The recent conceptualization of organizations as cultures has brought the analysis of organizational stories into the limelight in organizational communication research. This paper reports the initial findings of an on-going research project that focuses on stories in high technology organizations.

Organizations as Cultures

The conceptualization of organizations as cultures has been received by organizational communication researchers and practitioners with enthusiasm and optimism. The framework provides a fresh perspective from which to view organizations and guide research efforts.[1]

A culture is "the sum total of ways of living, organizing and communing built up in a group of human beings and transmitted to newcomers by means of verbal and nonverbal communication."[2] The culture, complete with attitudes, values, norms, and rules, provides a context for organizational sense-making. Members create their own organizational reality by interpreting the behaviors and activities they see, the stories and myths about the organization that they hear, and pressures to conform to the norms

and practices of the organization that they feel.

The organization's culture is not static, but is re-created and changed through communicating members. "When they talk, write a play, sing, dance, fake an illness, they are communicating; and they are creating their culture."[3] Organizational culture is both a product and a process, a being and a becoming.

One group of researchers who investigate organizations as cultures adopts an interpretive approach. "As an alternative research model, interpretation centers on the study of meanings . . . the way individuals make sense of their world through communicative behaviors."[4] The researcher seeks to understand the commonplace events that occur in organizational life and how those events serve to construct social reality or culture. As Geertz suggests, the study of culture is not a search for covering laws, but rather an exploration into plausible interpretations.[5] The interpretive researcher focuses on "whatever a member must know or believe in order to operate in a manner understandable and acceptable to other members and the means by which this knowledge is produced and transmitted."[6] One medium for transmitting cultural knowledge is the story.

Storytelling in Organizations

Organization members tell stories to each other. These narratives usually present plots, characters, and action lines that provide information about ways of behaving in the organization. New hires can "learn the ropes" of an organization,

become enculturated, by analyzing the scripts of organization stories they hear. According to Bormann, such analyses helps the newcomer learn the symbolic world of the organization by providing information about the heroes and villains, the behaviors that are rewarded and punished, and the power structure of the organization.[7] Stories can also serve as controlling mechanisms in that they are prescriptive. Wilkens categorizes stories as third-order controls of behavior. First-order controls are direct orders or rules; second-order controls are normative procedures. "Third-order controls are found in the assumptions of definitions of the situation which are taken as 'givens' by organizational participants."[8] Stories are cultural "givens." They play an important role as third-order controls for three reasons: (1) they enable organizational members to remember values and principles as well as specific information; (2) they create belief and understanding; (3) they encourage organizational commitment through their claims of uniqueness.[9]

From her research, Brown attributes five functions to stories. First, stories provide information about the rules of the organization. Second, stories reflect the values and beliefs that members have about how past events occurred. They serve to sharpen the collective memory of the organization (Wilkens' first reason). A third function serves to increase organizational commitment by focusing on the power structure. Stories about the boss or top management are prevalent in organizational storytelling. Fourth, stories maintain the formal culture by reinforcing traditions and customs. Finally, they provide an

on-going history of the organization that makes it an identifiable social entity with a past and a future.[10]

Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo, adopting a dramatistic perspective, view stories as cultural performances. "Storytelling performances are important because they typify certain experiences as being, in principle, worthy of emulation (when the story glorifies success) or deserving of caution (when the story accentuates failure)."[11] Stories portend the future by detailing the past.

Stories in organizations have traditionally been considered unique. The content of stories provides information about a specific organization's culture that distinguishes it from other organizations. This claim to uniqueness is the focus of a recent research effort that found generic story types in a wide variety of organizations. Martin et al. found seven common story types that appeared in a variety of organizational settings. "By classifying stories into common types, we imply that some elements of the content of the story texts, and perhaps some aspects of organizational life, generalize across different contexts and time periods."[12] The seven types are: What Do I Do When a Higher Status Person Breaks a Rule? Is the Boss Human? Can the Little Person Rise to the Top? Will I Get Fired? Will the Organization Help Me When I Have to Move? How Will the Boss React to Mistakes? How Will the Organization Deal with Obstacles?

For Martin et al.'s project, stories were collected from organizational histories, academic literature and from organizational members. Although no frequency counts of each

story type were performed, and hence no claims of generalization to all organizations were made, the research shows that the types appear in virtually identical form in a wide variety of organizations.

According to the authors, the common stories address the basic dualities of organizational life--equality vs. inequality, security vs. insecurity, and control vs. lack of control. Although a basic value of our society is equality, the hierarchical nature of organizations demands unequal status. The story types "What do I do when a higher status person breaks the rule? Is the boss human? and Can the little person rise to the top? address the tension that emerges in situations when organizational inequality is brought to the forefront.

Three story types (Will I get fired? Will the company help me if I have to move? How will the boss react to mistakes?) are concerned with security issues. The security vs. insecurity duality addresses the conflict that occurs when individual outcomes become subordinate to organizational outcomes. The obstacle stories focus on the desire to have control over one's organizational life and the individual's inability to do so in the complex setting. Martin et al. suggest that the stories serve as a pressure valve that releases the tension created by these inherent dualities.

In addition to operating as a release mechanism stories help to rationalize the past in ways that are self-enhancing for the individual. They can attribute success to the heroes and failure to the environment. Finally, stories allow the employee to

identify with a good organization or distance himself or herself from a bad one.

The research reported in this paper is an attempt to utilize Martin et al.'s typology in classifying stories collected from a variety of organizations in one particular industry--high technology.

The Culture of High Technology

The high technology industry and its cultural trappings have been the focus of recent investigations. Peters and Waterman identify the "action orientation" necessary to succeed in high tech as a characteristic of excellence.[13] Books like Kidder's Soul of the New Machine and Hanson's The New Alchemists are fictional accounts that provide glimpses into the world of high tech and its idiosyncracies.[14] Deal and Kennedy describe high tech companies as work hard/play hard cultures where "action" is the operative ethic.[15]

The center of the high tech industry is an area of northern California located between San Francisco and San Jose called Silicon Valley. The 30 mile long strip of land has the highest concentration of high tech companies in the world. The most comprehensive investigation of high tech is Rogers and Larsen's Silicon Valley Fever: Growth of High Technology Culture, a book that documents the rise and growth of the Valley through news stories, corporate histories, and hundreds of interviews. According to Rogers and Larsen, the culture of high technology is

the future.[16] In her study of Silicon Valley engineers, Gregory found innovation and rapid change to be of major importance. "Participants often use a gold rush metaphor to describe the valley, and it seems to fit."[17]

Kelly found the culture of high tech to be action oriented and fast-paced. One of the norms, long working hours, is perpetuated by peer pressure and the sheer amount of work to be done. Other characteristics of the high tech culture include its enterpreneurial management style, its youthful employees and "its frontier spirit that is freewheeling and fiercely independent."[18]

This paper further explores the culture of high technology by examining types of organizational stories found in its representative companies.

Data Collection

A total of 58 stories were collected from 33 different high tech organizations. Informants identified the company, its size in terms of employees, and its product or service. They also described their position in the organization and how they learned about the story (grapevine, co-worker, boss, etc.).

The sample includes very large and well-known companies such as IBM, Hewlett-Packard, Digital and Intel, as well as considerably smaller firms such as Adaptec (86 employees) and Resonex (37 employees).

Informants occupied positions throughout the organizations: secretaries, engineers, regional managers, managers, bookkeepers,

trainers, technicians, production workers, programmers and security guards. Longevity of employment ranged from a few months to twenty years. The most common source for learning the story was the grapevine, followed by a co-worker, personal experience, a supervisor and a formal orientation meeting.

The stories were analyzed according to their scripts or skeletal structures. "A script is the skeleton of a story, what remains when the nonessential details have been stripped away."[19] Standard analyses include: hero/villain; the action line; and scene.[20] Each story was compared with Martin's common story types to see if it had the same script.

Is the Boss Human?

Eighteen of the collected stories were of this type. The high tech industry's heroes and villains are typically entrepreneurs who turned backyard garage operations into billion dollar industries and themselves into maverick millionnaires.[21] The positive version of the "boss story" describes an individual who is persistent, hard-working, brave, clever, creative or resourceful.

> Mr. W. is President and CEO of a computer company which he started in 1977. At that time, he was experiencing supply problems due to cutomers' unwillingness to purchase large quantities of CRT's and teletype units. He tried to borrow $50,000 from venture capitalists, but got no takers even though he would give up half of the business for the loan. He was so determined to succeed that he mortgaged his home, sold all his furniture, and his car. He was able to expand and his success story was the cover story on Fortune Magazine in 1981.

Another story relates the trials and tribulations of the Chairman of the Board of a major semi-conductor company.

> Mr. D. came to America from Israel. He worked as a gardener and saved his money in order to start his own company. When he finally had saved enough money he started a small semi-conductor company, producing integrated circuits. As time went by, his small company grew and it went public in 1980.

The lore of Silicon Valley is full of Such Horatio Alger tales. But some of these demigods, despite all their successes, are down-to-earth, humane persons as described in the following narrative.

> Mr. T. is founder of the company. He owns 55% of the company shares and is worth millions of dollars. He continues to come into the company and works daily. He is an average type of guy and well liked by all. A peculiarity is that he wears the same gray sweater every day without fail. His hobby is growing orchids and he loves to share them with his employees. He gives starter plants away so he can share his hobby with others.

The management style of high tech companies is typically people-oriented and team-centered.[22] This characteristic is expressed in another version of the boss story.

> On a particularly hectic day one of the VP's was walking through the mixer department and noticed a sense of panic. A worker explained that they were running behind. The VP rolled up his sleeves and started to help. For the next couple of hours he did whatever he was told to do. At 5:00 p.m. everything was ready to ship and he took the whole crew out for pizza and beer.

The preceding stories illustrate the positive side of the equality vs. inequality duality--that top people are admirable, approachable, and humane, and worthy of emulation: the negative side of this duality presents top management as neither admirable

nor humane. The entrepreneur as self-centered villain is described in the following tales.

> When the company moved to their new building, two handicapped parking spots were required by law though there were no handicapped employees. The founder used both of these spaces to park his Ferrari, collecting two $50 tickets every couple of days when the cops came by. He would just pay these tickets and continue to park there, just to make sure he didn't get a dent in his Ferrari.
>
> The new secretary had been informed to watch out for so-and-so because he was known to make sexual advances on new and pretty women. He is divorced because of this and has already had three different secretaries of his own come and go. He doesn't sleep with his own secretaries but will with others'. He is the company president.

Other stories of this version describe a Scrooge-like boss who does not allow Christmas decorations in the office; a vice president who drinks to excess and a superior who smokes smelly cigars during lunch breaks.

Both versions of "Is the Boss Human?" stories focus on the power structure and by emphasizing its existence, serve to legitimate it.

What Happens When Someone Breaks a Rule?

Rule-breaking and its consequences were themes in thirteen stories in the sample. These stories address the duality of security vs. insecurity and fulfill Brown's function of relaying organizational rules. "Such a story begins with a set of circumstances, develops implications from these circumstances, and then reaches a resolution of the implications."[23] The characters

in these stories are employees who break a rule and either suffer or rejoice in the consequences. Martin's rule-breaking story type involves a higher status person breaking the rule and a lower status person challenging the infraction. The stories in this sample do not fit Martin's script in that regard, hence the different title.

Rule-breaking stories help to enculturate new hires by telling them what they can get away with and what they cannot. All of the stories of this kind resulted in a negative consequence for the employee and thus serve as an admonish against breaking the rules.

> Some of the guys decided to play basketball after our shift was over. Everyone was in good spirits. More people showed up and we decided to have a game. Things got a little rough and two of the guys started shoving each other and being rather loud. It broke up and I did not think much more about it. As it turned out, one of the department heads found out about the shoving match and the two guys involved were let go. (The incident occurred on company grounds.)

> A group of people were busy around the shipping and receiving area. One guy was sitting there smoking a cigarette. A vice-president walked by and watched this for a while. All the workers, except this one guy, were busy. The VP walked up to the guy smoking the cigarette and asked, "Are you on a break?" The guy said no. The VP then asked him how much he made a week. The guy told him and the VP put his hand in his pocket, took out some money and handed it to the guy saying, "You're fired." The guy sitting there smoking a cigarette didn't even work for the company; he was waiting for his truck to be unloaded.

Even though the outcome of the second story was positive for the fellow smoking the cigarette, the "real employees" were apprised of the consequences of taking unauthorized breaks.

Other incidents of rule-breaking in the sample included

falsifying information on an employment application, office romances, sexual harassment, disagreeing with the boss, and unethical practices in making a sale.

How Will the Organization Deal with Obstacles?

Ten stories reflect this plot with a variety of internal and external obstacles confronting the protagonists--employees at all different levels in the organization. "The obstacle stories concern a duality created by a desire to control, and events that indicate our inability to do so."[24]

The following story reflects the "ready, fire, aim philosophy" of high tech.[25]

> For six months the company had no product. The Sales and Marketing staff was out there selling like crazy. They were selling an idea that was just on the drawing board. Finally they produced their first boards and all the employees (including the President) spent the day in the warehouse packing and addressing them.

The need for innovation and fast turnaround are characteristics of high tech. Other obstacles mentioned in this story type reflect the pressure for innovation and adaptability to the market: job redesign, constantly changing job functions, company reorganization. The industry of high tech involves high levels of uncertainty and companies that can surmount the obstacles that uncertainty produces, survive.

Although high technology industries appear to be less hostile to women's advancement than more traditional industries sexual harassment and discrimination still remain a part of corporate

life.[26] Three stories refer to such obstacles.

> During a marketing department meeting (5 years ago) a secretary caught the President's eye. After the meeting he advised the manager to invite her to that evening's dinner meeting and to seat her by him (President). The manager did as he was told and the secretary and President chatted throughout dinner. After the dinner, the President told the manager that he would like to spend the evening with the secretary. When the manager told the secretary this, she replied, "He can go jump in a lake," and went home. P.S. She did not lose her job.

In another harassment story, the protagonist did not succeed--she lost her management position when she complained of harassment from a peer.

Other Story Types

Three other story types appeared in the sample in smaller numbers: "Can the Little Person Rise to the Top?" (four stories); "Will I Get Fired?" (three stories); "Will the Organization Help Me When I Have to Move?" (one story).

The ten remaining stories did not fit any of Martin et al.'s types. Four of them had to do with institutionalized narratives--those that are included in the formal orientation programs. For example, each new hire learns about the original site of Digital, an old woolen factory in Massachusetts.

Two stories fit Brown's definition of legend in that they probably never took place but rather are "exaggerations which are seen to be true and representative of a class of events."[27]

> One of the processes in manufacturing required the semiconductor leads to be dipped into a molten pot of gold. Drippings from the gold would be washed down the

> drain nightly. One innovative engineer realized that many pounds of gold had accumulated in the sewer pipes beneath the facility. Day after day he watched the janitor wash the gold down the drain and one day devised a scheme to get the gold by removing the original sewer pipe. He removed 500 pounds of gold and hid it in a new building that was under construction. Unfortunately he was bitten by a stray rat hiding at the construction site and contracted a fatal form of rabies. Before he died he told of his finding, but to this day, no one ever recovered the gold.

Although this narrative provides a moral about breaking rules, it is a more exaggerated story than the type previously discussed.

The other legend details the resourcefulness of the company in its early days. In order to save money on maintenance fees, a goat was used to manicure the lawn. The maintenance person moved the goat from time to time throughout the day.

Two stories deal with unexplainable phenomena: a ghost who appears during the graveyard shift; and a computer that causes bad things to happen if its operator does not wish it good night.

The final story is industry-specific and hints at its "anything goes" reputation.

> The chip-making process requires that a photo of circuits is etched on glass prior to being reduced to micro chip size. At a Christmas party, one executive's wife was talked into having her nude image etched on a wafer glass. After this was done, the photo was incorporated into a chip design.

The moguls of high tech are often discribed as free-thinking and spirited. This story reflects that unconventional image.

Conclusion

Stories provide information about organizational sense-making. They are a medium for sharing culture by identifying heroes and villains, attitudes and values, beliefs and practices, and organizational rules. According to Bennett, stories are a basic unit of communication. The story form is "clearly one of the most pervasive and powerful agencies of social and psychological organization."[28] The analysis of stories can tell much about how organizations are accomplished.

The stories discussed in this paper were collected as part of an ongoing research effort to identify characteristics of the culture of high technology. Although the small sample size and the data collection techniques (non-random) preclude any generalizations to all high tech companies, some previously identified characteristics are found in the sample. The entrepreneur as hero, the forces to innovate, the preferred management style, and the bias for action emerge as themes in the stories.

The majority of the stories fit one of Martin et al.'s common story types and provide evidence for these researchers' claim that organizational stories are not necessarily unique, but rather address issues that are common to organizational life. All organization members experience the tensions between individuality and conformity, that are inherent in modern organizing. Organizational stories reflect basic survival issues--how people cope with the complexities and dualities of organizational life and, as such, are an appropriate research focus for interpreting organizational behavior.

Footnotes

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